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A Case Study of
Social and Media Influence on Religion

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Abstract

This paper seeks to understand different religions and cultures by comparing and contrasting the similarities, differences, and opinions found within two religious/cultural groups. This case study uses the Social Learning Theory of communication to illustrate how perceptions of others are formed in a community with a growing Muslim population. It also uses the Cultivation theory to illustrate how news media has an effect on perception in this community. In addition, this research seeks to explore the opinions of individuals in regard to how they feel their religion/culture is portrayed in the media and to what extent they feel media coverage has an effect on stereotypes put on their religion/culture. This research uses a focus group, elite interviews, document review, and observation. Findings include social learning methods, similarities/differences between religions, varying perceptions, and a significant media influence.

Keywords: religion, culture, media, Social Learning theory, Cultivation theory, qualitative, perceptions

Introduction

Since the events surrounding the fall of the World Trade Center by members of Al Qaida (Tidgewell, 2007, p. 2), who claimed their act was in the name of Islam, non-Muslim Americans have become not only more aware of those that surround them but also afraid and angry toward Muslims in American. Around the ninth anniversary of 9/11, plans for an Islamic center, also called mosque (English) or masjid (Arabic), were announced. The plans were for building the center within blocks of the attack nine years earlier. This announcement caused a lot of debate within the media.

This paper represents a case study to demonstrate the dynamics of the understanding between different religions and cultures by comparing and contrasting the similarities, differences, opinions, etc found within religious/cultural groups.

In a middle-sized, southern city, this research uses the Social Learning Theory of communication to illustrate how perceptions of others are formed. In addition, this research seeks to explore the opinions of individuals in regards to how they feel their religion/culture is portrayed in the media and to what extent they feel media coverage is objective about their religion/culture. The Cultivation Theory is used to explain how media has an effect on actions and the perceptions of others. Document reviews on religious texts are used to more clearly explain religious beliefs as they are discussed within the paper.

Research questions posed for this research are as follows:

RQ1: How are perceptions and behavior formed in relation to religion?

RQ2: What are the similarities and differences across religions/cultures in a middle-sized southern city?

RQ3: What are perceptions people have about their own religion/culture and of other cultures/religions in a middle-sized southern city?

RQ4: How does the media affect the perceptions people have on culture and religion in middle-sized southern city?

The purpose of this research is to better understand religion and why there is tension between religious groups. While the dynamics of such interactions are unique in various communities, the case study approach seeks to provide trends and examples that may be applied to other communities. The research questions above need to be addressed because by documenting how members of differing religious groups perceive themselves, their religion and other religions, similarities across religious lines may surface and provide support that, as humans, we are all similar in some ways. From a communications standpoint, similarities may serve as a unifier in areas such as communicating with and/or advertising to diverse publics. Similarly, differences found may aid in targeting a more specific audiences whether in advertising or other forms of communications.

Addressing how individuals perceive the media in this equation may help mass media professionals understand how to more efficiently report to and write about varying groups, which will then influence the perceptions of the general public, according to the Cultivation Theory of communications. Research question four is necessary to gain understanding of how members of a religious or cultural group are socialized into said religion/culture.

The Social Learning Theory of communications explains how perceptions and behavior are learned socially within a community or family over a period of time, which supports the socialization into a religion/culture.

Literature Review

Social Learning Theory

Picture Source: euranet.eu

Most people have been accused of speaking like their mother or standing just like their father, but why? In 1977, Albert Bandura published his Social Learning Theory. "Social learning theory approaches the explanation of human behavior in terms of a

continuous reciprocal interaction between cognitive, behavior, and environmental determinants" (Bandura, 1977, p. vii). What this means is that humans learn behavior socially through interactions, and every interaction is a stimulus that humans react to in a way they have learned socially, including religious interactions. For example, a child may see loved ones singing religious songs and copy the behavior, resulting in positive feedback from others. A factor within the loved ones singing would be a stimulus to the child; the child's imitation would be the response and also a stimulus for positive feedback from others, which would stimulate similar behavior from the child in the future.

Bandura (1997) described two methods of learning, by response consequence and through modeling. Response consequence explains that people "not only perform responses but also notice the effects they produce" (p. 17). If the outcome is positive, the behavior is considered acceptable, while negative outcomes prove to follow unacceptable behavior. Furthermore, anticipation for the positive or negative consequence motivates humans to produce certain behaviors to get the desired consequence, even if this is just a smile. Bandura says, "most actions are thus largely under anticipatory control" (p.18). He demonstrates this anticipation control using the motivations behind buying home insurance as the anticipation that something may happen and acting to prepare for it (p.18). This can also be associated with religion and the anticipation that our soul will go one of two places after we die, depending on how we act within our lives. This may also be adjusted to any belief system.

Reinforcement is also a factor. In a 1966 study by Spielberger and De Nike, children were rewarded with positive words when they gave a certain response. They found that, "reinforcing consequences were ineffective in modifying behavior as long as participants were unaware of the reinforcement contingency; but participants suddenly increased the appropriate behavior when they discovered which responses would be rewarded" (as cited in Bandura, 1977, p. 19). Once the children discovered which responses received positive word rewards, they began giving that response more to get the reward. The outcome explains why we give similar responses as those close to us. People learn proper responses. Positively, this may also be compared to a reward possibly received when one learns a new quote from their holy text or follows a learned custom or teaching. Negatively, this could also be compared to the reward of smiles and laughter from friends, as well as the feeling of belonging in a group when one uses negativity against another person or group. This demonstrates how racism and negativity against another culture are possibly formed.

Schmierbach (2010) recently completed a study about reinforcement in which participants were observed while playing a videogame. During the course of the game, participants played alone, cooperatively with another player, and competitively against another player. Afterward, each participant completed a questionnaire. This study looked at the points earned within the game as the reward, or reinforcement for actions. The study found that participants in competitive play showed "the highest level of cognitive violence, whereas cooperative players scored markedly lower" (Schmierbach, 2010, p.265).

This study used the Social Learning Theory to support how videogame reinforcement influences violent behavior. Another method of learning behavior is by modeling. As sated by Bandura, "from observing others one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions this coded information serves as a guide for action" (Bandura, 1977, p. 22). Within this method of learning, there are four processes: attention, retention, motor reproduction, and motivation. In order to act, we must first pay attention to our model, retain the action and consequence, reproduce the action and have motivation for this act (p. 24-28). This is why we have always been told that we walk like our fathers or bite our lip like our mothers. These actions were learned through modeling our parents or other individuals.

A more recent study using this method was done by Bryson (2009), in which social learning was used to describe behavior and culture in animals and humans. This author quoted Boyd and Richerson's (1995,1985) explanation for limits on social learning, which says:Social learning is less adaptive relative to individual learning the faster the learners' environment changes. This is because information not gained directly from the environment might be out-of-date (as cited in Bryson, 2009, p.80)

Social learning changes according to the speed at which the surrounding environment changes. If the environment changes, referring to others for modeling may be outdated. This may be compared to fashion. School-age females do not generally dress in the same clothes as their mother because the style within their environment, which consists of peers from school, changes frequently. Using an older individual as a model would not get a positive response from younger peers. Therefore, girls dress to fit in. If their mother gives a negative response, such as punishment, for wearing inappropriate clothing, the girl may negotiate the environment and the mother model to create her own style. Parents train children using social learning techniques because "parents are strongly motivated to provide such tutelage since they want their children to predict and accommodate their own behavior" (Bryson, 2009, p.92).

Parents want their children to adapt to them and fit into their family, so they train the child using social learning. This explains how people are conditioned to follow family traditions, culture, and/or religious practices. An additional statement within this research is that an "assumption of this model is that the only advantage of social learning is avoiding the cost of exploratory behavior, which may be dangerous" (p. 80). This attempt to remain safe may partially explain how and why negative opinions of others may be formed, self-preservation against the unknown.

Cultivation Theory

Humans also learn through media, according to the Cultivation Theory of communication. This theory, developed by George Gerbner in 1980, states that "The television set has become a key member of the family, the one who tells most of the stories most of the time" (as cited in Severin and Tankard, 2001, p.268). Severin and Tankard explains that cultivation is a "teaching of a

common worldview, common roles, and common values" (p. 268).

Muller (2009) published research about a "Dutch government funded drama series called Westside that "deals extensively with cultural issues within communities" (p. 241). The author states that the show was intended to "improve mutual understanding between ethical groups and reduce interethnic tensions" (p. 240). The study was an experiment in which participants were shown episodes of Westside and asked to answer two questionnaires, one upon beginning the experiment and one upon exiting the experiment. The author states that viewers tend to react to characters they see on television in a similar fashion as reacting to a real-life situation.

The purpose of the experiment was to document changed perceptions as a result of the drama. The findings of this research were that "watching the multicultural drama Westside significantly lowered perceptions of ethic threat as compared to watching a mainstream soap opera" (p.253). This finding led to the conclusion that television series that show varying cultures in a positive way can affect both tolerance and perceptions of others.

Mainstreaming and Resonance

Mainstreaming happens when viewers consume television in a heavy amount and the message converges the outlooks of different groups. Resonance is identified when the "cultivation effect is boosted for a certain group of the population" (Severin and Tankard , 2001, p. 269). Also within this theory is the news refraction hypothesis, which suggests that "exposure to local news content might have a strong influence on perceptions of issues such as crime because of the high reality of the message (particularly on television)" (p.269). This hypothesis means that news content can affect how a person perceives the world around them. To bring this into focus, the events of 9/11 were all over the news, as well as stories surrounding the people involved.

Terry Jones, a pastor who planned a Qur'an burning day around the ninth anniversary of 9/11, was all over the news as well. The depiction of these people and events affect how people react. A person seeing the story of the pastor may react to this story as if it were a personal threat, since news content possibly has "a strong influence on perception," as stated above. The current study fits into this grouping of research because it seeks to understand how all of these factors come together to form personal perspectives about religion and culture. As evident above, there have been quite a few studies over Social Learning and Cultivation, but none found have been found that directly link it to religion or culture. There have also been research over religion and culture, but none found have tied it to social learning or cultivation.

One article about religion states that, "according to a 2005 Newsweek poll, 88% of Americans considered themselves as either spiritual or religious" (as cited in Mikkelson and Hesse, 2009, p. 40). However, the article goes on to state that though religion and discussions about religion are important, many people feel uncomfortable discussing this topic, possibly to minimize risk. The author states that religious individuals are "frequently uncomfortable communicating with the nonreligious and often create negative stereotypes of them" (p.41). This may also be reversely true. In fact, religion is a topic referred to as "taboo" (p.41). This may explain why there has been no study of this nature in the past.

Methodology

This research was conducted in a Mid-South town with a 55,500+ population. There is one masjid within the area. According to an interview with Imam Abdul Rahman Bin Mohammad, the masjid serves an estimated five hundred Muslims. This numbers is up from an estimated 250 since 2009.

Research for this case study was based on focus groups, in-depth interviews, document review, and observations. The first question used a review of past literature, a focus group and elite interviews. Question two used focus groups, elite interviews and document review. Research question three was addressed using the focus groups and elite interviews methodologies, and question four was addressed with a combination of focus groups, elite interviews and observation. A chain/snowball sample was used in the research to obtain focus group participants and elite interviews. This means that the researcher sought out a member of each religious group, and that person suggested possible candidates for the focus groups. Using this method, which makes the researcher and participant at least one step removed from each other, ensured that the researcher was not closer in relationship to any focus group members than another. The religions or denominations of study are Islam and United Methodist.

The focus group was composed of four individuals, a male and female from each religious background: Christian and Muslim. The pairing of participants from each religion was used to make the participants more comfortable. Also, one participant may feel more comfortable addressing one topic, while the other participant of the same religion feels more comfortable addressing another. Pairing also allows members of the same religion to bounce ideas off of one another, which keeps ideas flowing. This also provides support for possibly nervous participants. Religion is a topic that is widely discussed and argued about, so the concern within the focus groups was to make participants feel comfortable.

The ages of participants ranged from 25-45. This age range was chosen because younger individuals still live at home with parents. At 25, the likelihood of a person living away from home and making their own decisions is higher than younger individuals. Yet, this age range still represents the younger demographic of independent adults. During the focus group, the researcher recording the meeting and took notes on key words, phrases, topics, etc. These notes were used to represent the 25-45 demographic of independent adults of varying religions, to prepare questions for the elite interviews, and compared to responses by the elite participants, who represent the leading demographic of each religion.

As stated above, in-depth elite interviews were conducted with religious leaders from each religion within this study. One religious leader from each religion was interviewed so that leader and follower comments could be compared. Also, elite interviews were used so that the research would have a

reliable foundation in each religion. Additionally, elite interviews were necessary because religious leaders have made religion part of their life's work, which means they are more used to answering questions about their faith. Religious leaders are generally more comfortable addressing topics within their religion and provide a differing perspective than a religious follower. Each leader was interviewed separately, and as with the focus groups, notes were taken during each interview as it was recorded; notes consisted of significant phrases and recording times for easy access to audio clips.

Document reviews of the primary holy texts used by each religion, Christian Bible and Muslim Qur'an, were used within this study to support statements made within focus group meetings and elite interviews. If a participant quoted a verse to support his/her perspective, that quote was reviewed and quoted within this study. If a participant referred to a broad, but notable topic or belief, verses within his/her holy text that cover that subject were reviewed and quoted within this text, if necessary. Also, document reviews were used to illustrate similarities across religious texts. Though varying religious groups use different holy texts, some teachings and stories are similar across texts. For example: Christian and Islamic texts both contain Adam and Eve, though the stories vary, the teachings are the same.

The researcher's position within this case study is that of a student. The researcher seeks to learn about varying religions to better understand the conflict within the United States and the world as a whole. The researcher was raised in a small town with little diversity. Churches were not divided by religion, but by denomination as all were protestant. Though raised primarily in a family that followed Church of Christ, the researcher had family members who attended Baptist and Pentecostal establishments, each of which have been attended by the researcher at various times in her life. The researcher, though religious, was not a frequent churchgoer due to her parents' conflicting work schedules, court-ordered parental visits with her father away from home, disagreement with some customs, etc. These factors allowed the researcher to experience different denominations by attending church with family members who did not attend the Church of Christ.

Additionally, upon attending college, the researcher was able to experience diversity on two college campuses. The researcher has lived in a dorm setting with many differing individuals, shared an apartment with people of differing races/cultures/nationalities, and maintained friendships with a wide range of individuals from various religions/races/nationalities/cultures/genders/ etc. Due to the lack of diversity within the researcher's hometown, the experience of attending different churches and her experiences in both her living environments and college settings, the researcher developed an interest in learning about individuals from different backgrounds. This is a strength of the researcher because the individual's mind is not set to any one denomination or religious structure, which allows her to relate with a diverse range of individuals easily. A weakness of the individual is that travel from home was limited, so the individual has never fully experienced a different way of life.

As a precaution against biases within this research, the researcher has asked individuals from different backgrounds to proofread her study for any biased statements, words, or phrases that are not direct quotes from her research. Any biased interpretation of this research is due to the interpretation of the individual reader.

Results

Learning Religion

A review of Social Learning theory and Cultivation theory literature was used to answer RQ1: How are perceptions and behavior formed in relation to religion? In addition, one focus group and two elite interviews were used. Within the focus group and elite interviews, themes for learning about religion were determined as: family, community, school, religious center, personal experience, media and study. Family, community and religious center were the most common answers and were listed by each participant. Family words were generally the first answer given with parents being most prevalent. Learning religion through family, community and a religious center would support the previous literature about the Social Learning theory.

All Muslim participants and only one Christian participant listed school. However, the Christian focus group participant, Preston Dean, said, "Back in high school, everyone I knew in high school was religious," which is stating that Dean did not learn religion from school authorities but from peers. A speculation about the phenomenon of only Muslims listing school as a method for gaining religious knowledge is that this may be the result of being from another country. American law dictates separation of church and state, which prohibits teaching religion in public school. According to the Muslim participants, Islam is integrated into school, which is also support for the Social Learning theory.

All participants expressed that they did see religious items from the media. However, media were listed as a specific learning method by a Christian focus group participant who works with children. Shannon May stated, "I teach children, and from what my children learn…through the media, is that Muslim people are bad." Learning through media is support for the previous literature about the Cultivation theory.

Both elite interview participants stated that they discuss religion, both their own and others, within the religious center setting. Pastor John Miles of the First United Methodist Church of Jonesboro stated, "I preached a series of sermons on world religions last year, and I did talk about Islam." Similarly, Imam Abdul Rahman Bin Mohammad of the Islamic Center of Jonesboro stated, "Islam teach clearly about Christianity."

An observation made upon visiting the two religious centers is that upon entering the masjid, there are a few posters and several pamphlets on the wall of the worship area featuring Islam, other religions and how they relate to Islam. The Methodist church had no such visible material, though it should be noted that the researcher did not enter the worship area of the church. There were, however, visible paintings of Biblical settings within the observed area of the church.

Similarities/Differences

To answer RQ2: What are the similarities and differences across

religions/cultures in a middle-sized southern city, focus groups, elite interviews and document review were used. Themes of similarity included belief in God, belief in Jesus and teachings. In fact, the stories and teachings of both religions are very similar. Similar teachings discussed were as follows: love, peace, good deeds, ethics, morals, sin, humility, respect and mercy. Included within sin, the similar teaching that murder is forbidden was specifically discussed within both elite interviews and the focus group. An assumption associated with the topic of murder being discussed by all participants is the association of Islam to extremist killings and the ongoing war involving Christian and Muslim countries.

One theme of difference was the Muslim teaching that Jesus was a prophet, which is countered by the Christian teaching that Jesus was the Son of God. Muslims believe that God is the only God. As stated in the Qur'an (2008), " But the God of you is the One God (Allah): there is no god but He: all things He comprehends in His knowledge" (Surah 20:98). Christians believe that Jesus was the Son of God, who was sent by God to be a savior to humanity. The Bible says, "The angel answered, The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35, NIV). Christians worship Jesus, who Muslims believe to have been a human prophet.
Another theme of difference is Muhammad, the prophet. In Islam, Muhammad is the final prophet that came after Jesus. The Qur'an (2008) says, "But those who believe and work deeds of righteousness, and believe in the (Revelation) sent down to Muhammad- for it is the Truth from their Lord,- He will remove from their ills and improve their condition" (Surah 47:2). The Bible does not speak of Muhammad. Christians do not believe Muhammad was a prophet of God.

Perceptions

In order to answer RQ3: What are perceptions people have about their own religion/culture and of other cultures/religions in a middle-sized southern city, the elite interview and focus group methodologies were used.   All participants described each religion using terms similar to those listed in the teachings theme under the Similarities/Differences category above. However, as individuals moved past initial descriptions of the religions as a whole, deeper perception words and phrases emerged. Three main themes came from this category: extremisms, defenses, and ignorance.

Extremisms were used throughout the focus group and each interview. It should be noted that all participants used the following words or phrases in describing their own religion, the other religion represented, and also in making assumptions about how others perceive their religion. Therefore, the perceptions listed below are not all members of one religion speaking about another, but all members contributing perceptions they have and have witnessed. When describing Muslims, the following extremisms were used: conquering, controlling, impose Islam, terrorist, radical, and extremist. Christians were described as, ignorant of Islam, cult, crazy, extremist, push Christianity, and demonizing of Islam. An observation made during the elite interviews was that each religious leader stated that the other

religion seemed to push or impose their religion. It seems that members of both religions have similar views about the other religion, as was also evident from the focus group. However, members of each religion describe the other religion in a positive way as well when describing teachings of that religion.

Defensive words and phrases make up the second theme in the perceptions category. All individuals used an extremist example from their own religion and stated that the action described was not their religion. The following dialogue between May, Muslim focus group member, Khalid Zaid Alsubait, and Muslim focus group member, Esraa Hussain, illustrates this phenomenon:
May: I don't want anyone to define Christianity by Timothy McVeigh that blew up the federal building in Oklahoma City. That's not appropriate. That's not who we are. I don't, the terrorist people that are Muslim, I don't use those people to define Muslims as a whole because that's not…
Alsubait : Actually, those who did that, who did this, tand they named Muslims, actually they are not Muslim.
Hussein: Yes, they are not Muslims.
Alsubait : Because if you understand Islam, you…
Hussein: Right, because in Islam we cannot kill anybody. We can't kill anybody. It's really not allowed for Muslim to kill anybody.
May: It seems to be a very peaceful religion.

Similar dialogue took place throughout the focus group. Also, both interview participants made similar statements. Extremists connected to Christianity, or claiming to have a connection to Christianity, discussed included: Oklahoma City Bomber Timothy McVeigh, the Ku Klux Klan, and military funeral protesters of the Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, KS. Extremists with an association to Islam were discussed as follows: bus bombers and Sadaam Husain.

Ignorance is the final theme within the perceptions category. This theme was very prevalent throughout the study, and it was mainly aimed at Christianity or the media within America. All participants expressed the opinion that there is ignorance toward Islam. Words and phrases such as ignorance, lot to be learned, people don't know anything about us, people should learn more, etc. were found throughout the dialogue. May said, "I think it boils down to, on the American side, ignorance. I'm not saying we're stupid people, but ignorance as in other religions. People haven't taken the time to know what the Muslim community is about." Within an elite interview, while explaining why Islam teaches about Christianity and other religions, Imam Mohammad explained that it is to help Muslims like other people so that a dialogue can be reached and communication and education can take place. An observation made was that after recording had stopped, Pastor Miles stated that he had not met Imam Rahman. The number of local religious leaders of other religions with whom Imam Rahman has made a dialogue with was not discussed. Another observation is that all participants expressed a belief that it is the responsibility of religious leaders to teach truth about their religion and other religion, be knowledgeable about other religions, and clarify fact from falsity when

issues about religion arise locally or in the media.

Media Influence

To answer RQ4: How does the media affect the perceptions people have on culture and religion in middle-sized southern city, focus groups and elite interviews were used. The results of this question support the Cultivation theory of mass communication, as discussed within the literature review. Participants were all asked if they had noticed news coverage about their own religion, the other religion represented, and whether they believe the media has influence over the opinions of the public. All of these questions received a "yes" type of response. Themes within this category include drives to action, creation and devaluing. Drive to action words are words that drive the readers to an action or way of thinking, creation words are ones that imply the media creates a perception and devaluing words are those that seem to lead to or encourage the devaluing of a person or group.

Drive to action words and phrases used include: sway the public, push Christianity, drives, influences, and impose. All of these words seemed to have action to them and call for an action from the receiver, such as persuasion in belief or thought. Creation words used include: manufacturer of hate, strike misconceptions, strike lies, shapes, and creates. These words seemed to give the impression that media create a falsity, whether by lack of proper research or of lack of understanding about how to convey religion properly. Most participants stated that both religions, particularly Islam, were conveyed within the media along with falsities or misconceptions. Many participants did, however, state that they didn't believe it was intentional, but rather a lack of research/understanding or the retrieval of information from unreliable sources. Imam Rahman said, "…even with research you meet people who are ignorant, that do not know. They say some words, and they don't know, and then the research becomes ill for the society."

All participants recognized a connection between Islam and the concept of terrorism, though all Muslim participants expressed that this connection is false and contradictory of their religion. Both Christian and Muslim participants compared the connection of Islam to terrorism with terroristic acts such as the Oklahoma City bombing being connected to Christianity. Observations of this phenomenon took place during the research of this study. The researcher only asked if participants had been exposed to media coverage about Islam and to give their perception of how they think the media conveys their religion and the other religion represented. The researcher never led the thought with such words as terrorism, but terrorism or a form of that word was one of the most repetitive words in the study.

Also, it was observed that upon asking the question: Have you noticed members of your religious establishment discussing religious topics from the media, Pastor Miles said, "Well, ya know, certainly a lot of us talk about terrorism from time to time. So, I mean, yeah, we hear about terrorism mostly from the media. I mean, there is no way, so yeah, yeah, we talk about it. " The observation is that when asked about media coverage concerning Islam, he immediately discussed terrorism. It was also an observation that Muslim individuals claimed to have and utilize various resources to learn about other religions, whereas Christians seemed to have less exposure to other religions. Dean claimed that until he had personal experience with Muslims and sought other information, his only exposure to that religion or culture was through the media.

Devaluing words were: highlight negativity, ignorance, demonize Islam and transgressor. It is an observation that both religious leaders used the word "demonize" to describe how American media conveys Islam, which is even more significant by the fact that the two leaders have never met. A further observation is that they both described the devaluing process in media and within a society almost exactly as the other did, even citing the same example: the Crusades. Both leaders stated that the devaluing of Islam within the media and the society as a whole is reminiscent of the Crusades.

Both explained that devaluing is harmful because devaluing a person or group of people leads to anger, anxiety or fear toward those people and makes it easier to attack or harm them. Pastor Miles cited such an instance occurring after 9/11 in saying, "It also makes us more anxious and more willing to do things that we really shouldn't do, like invade Iraq."

Discussion

This study used the Social Learning theory and Cultivation theory to examine religion within a middle-sized southern city. The participants all claimed they were taught religion from family, community and religious center associations with Muslim individuals and one Christian adding in school as a means for learning religion. This was support for the Social Learning theory of communications, which states that behavior and cognition are learned socially through cognitive, behavior, and environmental determinants. It was discussed that the lack of school as a means for learning Christianity may be linked to the separation of church and state within America, which states that religion is not to be taught in American schools.

Similarities and differences were discussed within category two. Similarities consisted of teachings, and the concept of God and Jesus. However, differences were determined as a difference in holy text, a difference in the belief behind Jesus, and a differing belief about Muslim prophet Muhammad. It was discussed that the religions are very similar, but the differences are significant as they are difference in the basic foundation of the two religions.

Perceptions were divided into extremisms, defenses and ignorance. It was discussed that each religious group recognizes that their religion is somewhat represented in the media by extremists that claim to follow their religion. Both groups defended their own religion and the other religion represented by comparing acts of terrorism linked in the media to both religions and defending their religion against involvement with these occurrences. Ignorance within the media and society in relation to understanding various religions was determined to be a leading factor in why there is tension between religions. It was discussed that both focus group participants and religious leaders recognize it as a responsibility or duty of the religious leader to teach truth about their religion and other religion, be knowledgeable about other religions, and clarify fact from falsity when

issues about religion arise locally or in the media.

Media influence was divided into drive to action, creation, and devaluing. It was discussed that the media seems to drive people to develop certain perceptions about others. It was also discussed that the media seems to create falsities, generally a link between a religion and a group or person that claims to represent that religion, though others from the religion view those people as extremists and not members of their religion. Devaluing was also discussed as an issue that arises from the media. Using words and terms that devalue or label a group or person was determined as having negative effects, such as generating anxiety or hostility toward that group or person and leading to the belief that it is ok to harm those individuals. It was also discussed that this is not believed to be the fault of the media entirely, but possibly the lack of proper research or the accumulation of untrustworthy sources.

Conclusion

It is the conclusion of this research that religion is both socially learned and cultivated within us to some degree. Similarities are prevalent between Christianity and Islam, but there are significant differences in the foundations of belief that make the religions different. However, through education and understanding between religions, communication and acceptance can be achieved on some level.

Varying perceptions are numerous throughout this study, but it was determined that similar perceptions are there for each religion. Each religion seemed to have a similar view of the other and of their own religion. It was concluded that falsities and misconceptions are there for both religions, as well as positive opinions and that it is the responsibility of the religious leader to be knowledgeable about other religions and clarify falsity from fact.

It was concluded that news media do have an influence on the development of perceptions in relation to religion, and that for some individuals the media is the only perception or window to another religion that they receive. This finding supported the Cultivation theory of mass communication. With this knowledge, the media has an opportunity to influence perceptions about others. Media's influence should be considered significant, and media coverage should be given only with facts and reliable sources. If truth is negative, it must be reported, but that does not mean that all media coverage related to one group must be negative. Media has the opportunity to neutralize some of the negativity by providing fair coverage. Providing well-researched, quality media would have a benefit on the media as well, as people would come to trust media outlets more. Furthermore, if media has this impact, televised sitcoms with more diversity themed situations, such as the Westside sitcom described within the literature review, would benefit society by displaying social interactions and opening up a gateway for communication and understanding of others.

This research is also beneficial to the educations system because it furthers study in the Social Learning theory and Cultivation and sets a design for future study. Ideas for future study include conducting this study in other regions, expanding the study to more religions, doing the study with separate focus groups divided by gender, having a counter focus group and interview with atheists, and remodeling the study to analyze race in the media and gender in the media.

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